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# STUDIES

## in the Spirituality of Jesuits



Ignatian Discernment

John Carroll Futrell, S.J.

Published by the American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality,  
especially for American Jesuits working out their *aggiornamento*  
in the spirit of Vatican Council II



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## THE AMERICAN ASSISTANCY SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

consists of a group of Jesuits from various provinces who are listed below. The members were appointed by the Fathers Provincial of the United States, in their meeting of October 3-9, 1968. The purpose of the Seminar is to study topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially American Jesuits, and to communicate the results to the members of the Assistancy. The hope is that this will lead to further discussion among all American Jesuits - in private, or in small groups, or in community meetings. All this is done in the spirit of Vatican Council II's recommendation to religious institutes to recapture the original charismatic inspiration of their founders and to adapt it to the changed circumstances of modern times. The members of the Seminar welcome reactions or comments in regard to the topics they publish.

To achieve these purposes, especially amid today's pluralistic cultures, the Seminar must focus its direct attention sharply, frankly, and specifically on the problems, interests, and opportunities of the Jesuits of the United States. However, many of these interests are common also to Jesuits of other regions, or to other priests, religious men or women, or lay men or women. Hence the studies of the Seminar, while meant especially for American Jesuits, are not exclusively for them. Others who may find them helpful are cordially welcome to read them.

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# IGNATIAN DISCERNMENT

by

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INTRODUCTION: Explanation of the approach to the problem and of its importance today.

There is no more central theme in Ignatian spirituality or, for that matter, in Christian spirituality itself than that of discernment. Unfortunately, commentators have tended to discuss almost exclusively the "discernment of spirits" as it is described in the Rules for the first and second weeks of the Spiritual Exercises. As a result it is sometimes obscured that the "discernment of spirits" is only a part of a much more complex, dynamic process of discernment leading to both individual and communal decisions -- "Elections" -- for action in response to the challenge posed to a man or to a community to live authentically the demands of the Jesuit vocation in an actual, concrete situation here and now. This study, therefore, will focus first upon the total process of Ignatian discernment and then will treat the discernment of spirits within the context of this process.

Many persons, including Jesuits, tend to think spontaneously and exclusively of the discernment of spirits when the expression "Ignatian discernment" is used. However, in Christian tradition discernment is a much broader conception, which involves choosing the way of the light of Christ instead of the way of the darkness of the Evil One and living out the consequences of this choice through discerning what specific decisions and actions are demanded to follow Christ here and now. The diákrisis pneumátōn -- discernment of spirits -- is a "sifting through" of interior experiences in order to determine their origin and to discover which ones are movements toward following the

way of light. The Greek word diákrisis and the Latin words discernere and discretio in their root meaning signify to divide, to separate, to distinguish, to render discreet. The application of the words specifically to the discernment of spirits or to the more complex spiritual process (enveloping the discernment of spirits) which leads to the actual choice of concrete action fluctuates both in Scripture and in Christian tradition.<sup>1</sup> Ignatius in the Spiritual Exercises uses the term exclusively in the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, but the Election is the result of the entire larger process. His vocabulary in the Constitutions more clearly reflects the larger context of discernment.

It is important today that Jesuits understand this larger process of Ignatian discernment and that they practice it; for there is a danger that we shall discern only the "spirits" in prayer and that we shall make our concrete decisions only out of a religiously oriented human prudence. The process of arriving at prudential decisions and the process of Ignatian discernment of our individual and communal response to the call of God here and now are different processes. There is some evidence that much of the province planning going on throughout the Society of Jesus at present is the former rather than the latter, unfortunately.

The vocabulary employed in this study represents a conscious attempt to re-express authentically the content of the insights and experience of Ignatius in contemporary language. Ignatius necessarily employed the language of his own historical and cultural epoch to express himself. Unfortunately, this vocabulary at times obscures for modern man the real meaning of what Ignatius says, because the words he used have a different connotation or even denotation today than they did during his own time. For example, in this study the expression "to hear and respond to the word of God here and now" constantly will be used to "translate" what Ignatius means by "to seek and find the will of God." The chief reason for this is that through modern exegesis we have rediscovered the richness of the biblical notion of the word of God



constantly being spoken to man in history, to which man must respond at every moment of his life.<sup>2</sup>

Now, Ignatius was perfectly conscious of this ongoing "covenant" relationship of man with God in history, though he did not have the theological vocabulary to express this experience. Underlying Ignatius' whole approach to discernment is his dynamic view of God's active love ceaselessly working in the world. Each new moment of life, each new concrete situation, the present condition of the individual person or community, the other persons involved, events, time, place, circumstances -- all of these contain within them God's call to which we must respond here and now. The language through which God speaks to man and man responds to God is the language of every day events. This dynamic Ignatian vision of God challenging us in events is manifested in his almost monotonous repetition in the Constitutions of the need to apply general principles "according to the circumstances of time and place and persons". It was in reading the meaning of these actual situations in the light of Christ that Ignatius would "seek and find the will of God".

The word of God, then, is spoken to a man or to a community in the persons, actions, events, and circumstances which confront and environ them at any given moment of their history. "Through the common, ordinary events of daily life God speaks to challenge the hearers and to evoke within them the response of love. The word of God bursts through the words, the events, the situations of everyday". Men must discern within the ambiguity of these situations, and among the various alternative choices of morally good decisions and actions open to them, which one choice is actually the response to the real call of God to them here and now. To succeed in this discernment men must "prophetically" interpret the concrete situation in order to discover within it the word of God, as the prophets of old interpreted the word of God to his Chosen People in the events of their history. The discerners, then, must prayerfully reflect upon the concrete situation -- the existential word of God -- in the light of His revealed word in

Jesus Christ, in the Bible, in the living tradition of the Church, and in the light of his personal history of spiritual experience: the words of God to him and his response to these words in his own life until the present moment.

Thus, the process of discernment requires a continuing "dialectic" of the existential word of God and the prophetic word of God. The dialectic consists of attending to all the factors posed within the concrete situation and then reflecting upon them in the light of the prophetic word of God, until one finally can assess, interpret, and determine what God is actually demanding from him as his response to the call of God to him here and now. As we shall see, the process of Ignatian discernment is a description of this dialectic.

It is because of the difficulty of this dialectic, this conversation with events and with God, this listening to the world and listening to the Holy Spirit, and, also, because of the time and patience and experience required in order to develop this high art of discernment within a man, that Ignatius is so insistent in the Spiritual Exercises upon the need of total openness of the exercitant to the director. The genesis and growth of the art of discernment in the exercitant is rigorously conditioned by the degree of his communication of his interior experiences to the director. The director functions as a kind of "objective mirror" to help detect the true meaning and the hidden motives operative in the consolation and desolation experiences of the exercitant, helping him to arrive at interior peace and openness to the Spirit, so that he can serve God with a free heart -- Ignatian "indifference". The presence of the director keeps the exercitant's discernment from wandering in imaginary fields or from becoming lost in the abstract; it forces the discernment to operate within the real and actual concrete situation, which mediates the word of God to him.

Rather than weighting this study with excessive footnoting, the writer will attempt to present a positive treatment of discernment based upon Ignatius' own practice and teaching of it.<sup>3</sup> To this end, the study will progress from some brief indications of the



source of Ignatian discernment and of Ignatius' vocabulary of discernment to an analysis of the Ignatian process of individual and communal discernment of decisions for action.

The writer is convinced that this discernment is the real end of the Spiritual Exercises and the great contribution of Ignatius to Christian spirituality: the continual discernment to arrive at the choice of authentic Christian response to the word of God in each concrete situation in life. The principles of Christian living are clear: living out Christ's great command of love according to the general norms He enunciated in the Beatitudes and exemplified in His life. How to live out these principles in specific, concrete situations is often extremely ambiguous. It is the function of Ignatian discernment to build the bridge between general principles and specific actions, not through "baptized" human prudence, but through prophetically interpreting the existential word of God in events.

This discernment, too, is the key to a living out of Ignatian spirituality individually and communally by Jesuits. Jesuit formation basically is formation in discernment of how constantly and concretely to serve Christ apostolically in companionship. Authentic discernment is demanded of the entire Society of Jesus today in facing the difficult decisions that must be made about the choice of apostolic missions and about the adaptation of Jesuit living to the signs of the times: discerning how to preserve authentic spiritual continuity across radical cultural discontinuity.

Finally, the writer is also convinced that this Ignatian discernment is the specific contribution that Jesuits have to make to the Church and to the world today through the formation of Christians who can truly discern how to live their Christianity fully in all the concrete events of their lives in the modern world.

Ignatius developed discernment in three contexts: (1) for personal, individual "Election" in the Spiritual Exercises; (2) for the decisions of the superior in the preliminary documents and in the Constitutions; (3) and in the same documents for the mutual or communal

discernment of the companions which is an integral part of the superior's process of discernment before making his decision. All three of these contexts reveal the same, basic, dynamic structure of discernment: a process which is made up of three steps which progress together in an harmonious rhythm, but which can be analyzed separately for clarity. All three utilize the technique of the discernment of spirits; but in order to understand discernment for Election in the Spiritual Exercises and the function of the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits within this process, the best approach is to begin with an analysis of the structure of the process of discernment for the superior's decisions which Ignatius gives in the Constitutions. Here, Ignatius illustrates the entire process involved in discerning and choosing a course of action, and the elements of the structure of this process are much more clear and concrete than they are in the more analytic presentation in the Spiritual Exercises.

## I. The Source of Ignatian Discernment

The vocabulary used by Ignatius in the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits in the Spiritual Exercises echoes language originating in the New Testament and developed through monastic tradition. The particular contribution of Ignatius to this tradition was his focussing upon the dynamic process of discernment as directed to the ceaseless response of a man in his whole life and in all of his actions to God's word to him in every concrete situation. St. Thomas Aquinas had treated the discernment of spirits (discretio spirituum) as an extraordinary gift enabling one to know future contingents and the secrets of the heart (Summa theologiae, I-II, Q. 111, a. 4). The judgment of concrete actions he had ascribed to the virtue of prudence considered analytically and rather abstractly. Ignatius, whose mental structure was completely dynamic and grounded in lived experience, sees discernment, rather, as an ongoing process of growth in living the life of the Spirit, an ever greater integration of desires, feelings, reactions, and choices into a radical existential attitude of total commitment to following Christ. The identification of the particular way that an



individual should embody and express this commitment in a permanent "state of life" is the purpose of the Election in the Spiritual Exercises; but living out this Election requires the constant discernment in every successive situation of how authentically to realize one's specific commitment to Christ here and now. It is through the growing experience of constantly integrating all the actions and relationships of life into a man's basic identity in Christ that he finally comes to feel the various impulses within him as motions of the Spirit -- or as thrusts away from authenticity. It is for this reason that (as will be shown) the word sentir is central in the Ignatian vocabulary of discernment, rejoining the ancient tradition of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Now, although by the time he composed the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, Ignatius had learned and employed much of the traditional vocabulary, he actually had arrived at his own understanding of discernment through personal experience. Manresa was his school and lived experience of growth in the Spirit was his teacher. Here, Ignatius went through the process of discovering his identity in Christ, a process which reached its term in the great illumination at the Cardoner, when he was given the grace of clarity: a synthetic view of himself and of the meaning of his life which integrated into a harmonious whole all of his past experiences, and which provided him with the norm of discernment for all his future decisions. Later on he would have many deeper mystical graces, but it was at the Cardoner that he saw in the divine light the meaning of his own being in the world. He understood the integration of all his past experiences and knowledge in a new personal synthesis so illuminating that he felt that he had hardly known them at all until then. Although he still would search for a long time to discover the specific goal to which God was leading him, the foundation of the Society of Jesus, he knew from this moment the essence of his own vocation: the apostolic service of Christ. This would be the norm of all his future discernment and decisions: going to Jerusalem, studying, seeking companions, founding his religious order, and writing

its Constitutions. He left the banks of the Cardoner to continue his constant search to hear the word of God and to respond to it totally, but he did so in the future with an understanding illumined by the clarity of God.

In his Spiritual Exercises Ignatius expressed in the language of his own time and culture the dynamic of growth in the Spirit. The aim of the Exercises is to lead to complete spiritual liberty, the capacity to serve God with a free heart, in order to direct all one's desires, all of one's life, uniquely to God, responding to the word of God fully at every moment. The Exercises provide the dynamic for discovering one's personal identity in Christ -- the election -- and for the continual, ongoing creation of this identity through discernment of how to live its consequences authentically at every moment. To be called to a "state of life", to find one's vocation, is on the psychological level the discovery of personal identity, the life-commitment which gives meaning to one's entire being in the world and which is known in faith to be the response to a personal charism, to the Holy Spirit actuating his presence and power within a man to call him to a specific service in love of Jesus Christ and of the People of God. In the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius shows that the continual creating of one's discovered personal identity in Christ is not a self-centered process of "self-fulfillment", but an ongoing progress in self-transcendence, in self-giving love, which leads to true personal fulfillment. "He who would save his life must lose it."

The Spiritual Exercises are the result of Ignatius' own lived experience as are the Constitutions, despite his use of traditional vocabulary and of classical religious rules. Although, as all men must, Ignatius sought in the language provided to him by Christian tradition within his own culture the means to express his insights, the source of Ignatian discernment was his own experience of constantly discerning the word of God and of the growing in the Spirit.

## II. The Ignatian Vocabulary of Discernment

Before turning to an analysis of the dynamic process of



Ignatian discernment, it will be helpful briefly to discuss the most constant terms in Ignatius' vocabulary of discernment.

#### A. Parecer

The word Ignatius uses most frequently in contexts involving discernment is parecer which fundamentally means an opinion formed by observing appearances. He employs the term to refer to the gamut of degrees of certitude, from self-deception due to doubtful subjective impressions all the way to evidential facts of manifest reality. The reason for the frequency of the word parecer is undoubtedly Ignatius' profound awareness, learned from living experience, of the extreme difficulty of arriving at complete certitude that one has actually discerned the word of God in ambiguous and complex concrete situations. The degree of certitude in discernment depends upon the clarity with which the various aspects of the situation appear, as well as upon the lucidity and objectivity of the person who forms his opinion from observing and weighing these appearances. In contexts concerning the communal discernment of the companions and the superior, Ignatius emphasizes the possibility of a variety of opinions and the need for dialogue with others in proportion to the complexity of the matter to be decided. For this reason, he also insists upon the necessity to leave concrete decisions to the "man on the spot", since he is in the best position to see and weigh all the aspects of the actual situation. Ignatius' employment of the word parecer emphasizes the possibility of error in discernment, despite good will, and the need of constant dynamic openness to the ever new word of God, God's active love in history, which can always present a new and unexpected challenge.

#### B. Mirar

The root meaning of mirar is to look at, to regard attentively. Ignatius uses the term constantly as a continual reminder of the need of prayerful and deep reflection in the light of the norms of discernment upon all of the evidence in the situation to be discerned. It is necessary to reflect upon all the concrete circumstances of the situation as well as upon one's own interior feelings in reacting

to them. This prayerful reflection forces one to go beyond appearances -- what first leaps to the eyes and feelings -- to profound confrontation of the situation with the demands of authentically following Christ here and now. Such prayerful reflection excludes all a priorism and supposes a deep spiritual freedom and openness to whatever challenge is posed by the word of God, even when it is disconcerting.

### C. Sentir

The key term in the Ignatian vocabulary of discernment is sentir, and the commentators have had a field day with it. The many nuances of sentir in the vocabulary of Ignatius are grounded in its root meaning of sense experience and of the sentiments or feelings sensibly experienced by a person. In the process of discernment, sentir comes to mean above all a kind of "felt-knowledge", an affective, intuitive knowledge possessed through the reaction of human feelings to exterior and interior experience. Knowledge for Ignatius was not merely an intellectual grasping of abstract propositions, but a total human experience of understanding with all of its emotional resonance. It is through attention to one's sentir, the vital testimony of profound human feelings during the discernment process, that one discovers the orientation of his impulses towards decision or action whether or not they lead to authentic response to the word of God. And at the same time one discovers the origin of these impulses: "discerning the spirits".<sup>4</sup>

This sentir for Ignatius was a matter of being before becoming a matter of reflex awareness. It is the result of a radical existential attitude, a shaping of the spirit, a "bent of being", a profound dynamic orientation of the person toward God. Rather than a conscious judgment, this radical existential attitude expresses the structure of a man's personal identity formed through his basic personal commitment. It is more complete than ideas possessed by intellectual knowledge, more solid than the fluctuations of superficial emotions. Ignatius knew from experience that in a living human person the act of forming opinions or of attaining knowledge or of making judgments carries with it an emotional resonance. The concrete



psychological process of personal consciousness involves at the same time the continuity of thoughts during reflection, the concomitant feelings constantly reacting to these thoughts -- feelings which confirm or call into question the orientation of the reflection -- and the growing understanding which involves both the thoughts and the feelings -- "felt-knowledge", sentir.<sup>5</sup> There is, then, in the discernment process a not easily distinguishable intermingling of opinions being formed from the observation of evidence, with the play of feelings reacting to these opinions and to prayerful reflection upon them, and with the formation and reformation of judgments of how to respond to the existential word of God here and now. The discernment issues in the sentir, the "felt-knowledge" that the decision taken is truly a response to the word of God and not a form of subtle self-seeking. The decision confirmed by this "felt-knowledge", however, is subject to human error. The spiritual liberty of the discernor may be perfect, but if the evidence for judgment is inadequate, the decision may be mistaken. Thus, every effort must be made to gather complete data for prayerful reflection and "felt-knowledge".

In the Ignatian vocabulary of discernment, then, sentir signifies felt-knowledge based upon the reaction of human feelings to reflection upon the various elements found within a concrete situation, felt-knowledge which is integrated into a larger structure of profound feelings entirely oriented to the authentic living out of one's personal identity in Christ, all grounded in the spiritual liberty and the basic existential attitude of a man totally committed to the apostolic service of Christ.

#### D. Juzgar

In the Ignatian vocabulary of discernment, juzgar, to judge, signifies the final act of determination or decision. This involves taking into consideration all the elements in the actual situation to be judged: the "opinion" arrived at through observation of the concrete circumstances, the "felt-knowledge" accompanying the "prayerful reflection" upon all the available evidence in the light of

the Gospel and of the norm of one's own personal identity in Christ, and the confrontation of the opinion and feelings of the discerner with those of others, especially of his spiritual director or his superior in order to arrive at the final step of the discernment process, the judgment -- the "Election" -- of how to respond to the word of God here and now. It is this judgment which Ignatius insists that the discerners seek to have "confirmed" by God as an authentic response to his divine call.

### III. The Structure of the Ignatian Process of Discernment

Through a study of the Ignatian vocabulary in contexts of discernment as they occur in the Spiritual Exercises, the Spiritual Diary, the letters, the preliminary documents (Monumenta Praevia) and the successive texts of the Constitutions, it is possible to disengage the basic structure of the process of Ignatian discernment. That the source of this discernment was Ignatius' own lived experience is shown by the striking fact that this structure as it is manifested in the Constitutions in describing the role of discernment of the superior with his companions is identical with the structure revealed in the discussions before the vow at Montmartre in 1534 and in the Deliberation of the First Fathers in 1539. To determine how Jesuits should respond to the word of God here and now, a process is followed which involves a permanent base, three steps of discernment, and the final decision and action.

The permanent base of discernment for Jesuits is the "scope of our vocation": the ever greater service of Christ in his Church in companionship by going anywhere in the world to help people in need of Christ.<sup>6</sup> This base provides the unchanging norm of all Jesuit discernment both individual and communal. It supposes the commitment of all the members of the Society of Jesus to consecrate all their lives and energies to achieve the end of the whole body. Unless this profound communion -- unio animarum -- exists as the common norm for all discernment, truly communal discernment is simply impossible. This is the common base upon which all are agreed, and



it is in function of it that decisions must be taken concerning the best means to achieve the end of the Society -- to realize the scope of our vocation -- here and now. Concerning these means it is possible and often inevitable that there will be considerable difference of judgment; but with truly Ignatian communal discernment it should be possible to arrive at a unified response to the word of God.

The three steps of the discernment process are:

(1) prayer for light from the Holy Spirit, which involves prayerful reflection upon all the available evidence in constant reference to Christ who is the living model of response to the Father, as well as discernment of the orientation of the profound feelings experienced during this prayer;

(2) gathering all possible evidence for judgment which demands not only the careful observation of all the concrete circumstances of the actual situation, but also dialogue with others either because of their special competence or of their particular access to the evidence;

(3) the continuing effort to find "confirmation" during every step of the discernment process as well as for the final judgment by the experience of deep interior peace within the spirit of an individual or the members of a whole community.

At the end of this process of discernment the decision for action is taken, but it is still open to verification through living experience and, at need, open to further discernment. It is useful to devote some consideration to Ignatius' understanding of each of these three steps in the process of discernment. In practice, these are not successive steps, but a continuing dialectic intermingling all three and progressing together towards the ultimate decision and the final confirmation. In analyzing the various steps in the process of discernment, one must never lose sight of their harmonious interplay in practice.

#### A. Prayer

The tremendous importance Ignatius placed upon the role of prayer in the discernment process is clear from the entire structure

of the Spiritual Exercises which precisely are an integrated program of prayer in order to arrive at the crucial Election of one's personal identity in Christ. It is equally clear in Ignatius' Spiritual Diary which gives an intimate record of his own use of prayer in discerning a matter of great importance for the life of the Society. Indeed, prayer is the central locus of the "discernment of spirits".

Prayer is absolutely essential for authentic discernment, whether individual or communal, in order that each man can arrive at true spiritual liberty -- not blinded to the evidence of the existential word of God in the light of the norm of discernment by subtle self-seeking, prejudice, or fixations caused by insecurity. Prayer is absolutely essential in order that each man can be truly open to the Spirit, seeking and desiring only the ever greater apostolic service of Christ in companionship. It is important to note, however, that the light sought and given in this prayer is not some kind of revelation of the content of the decision to be made. Ignatius does not assert that prayer alone -- even highly mystical prayer -- will provide a divine guarantee of the final decision, except in the case of an indubitable revelation. He allowed for such an instance in the First Time of Election in the Spiritual Exercises in the case of a St. Paul or of a St. Matthew. Rather, the content of the decision is to be reached through prayerful reflection upon all the evidence available from every source helping to discover the word of God in the actual situation. Ignatius' own mystical experiences, like those of other saints, were characterized by great light and interior understanding which were inexpressible in ordinary human concepts and words; and Ignatius himself warned of the necessity of distinguishing an authentic divine visitation from its consequent "afterglow", when one's own ideas and opinions, which are not immediately from God, come to the foreground of consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

The light of faith experienced in prayer is truly light upon the existential word of God here and now. It is the light given by the Spirit which "illuminates creatures" -- one's self, persons, events, circumstances -- in the light of Christ. Ignatius' vocabulary



contains many words and expressions stressing the search for light and clarity, and the constant vision to which he seeks to lead the exercitant in the Contemplation for Obtaining Love at the end of the Spiritual Exercises is to see all things as they are: from God, in God, for God. Ignatius seeks to lead a man to a lived "resonance" with Jesus Christ (sentir), achieved through prayer and through ongoing creative fidelity in responding to all the calls of the Spirit, no matter the cost (Ignatian "abnegation"). It is this resonance with Jesus Christ which will enable a man to discern among alternative, possible, morally good choices the one which is most in conformity with Christ's own following of the Father's will and, thus, to discover the "content" of the will of God here and now, the decision and action which are the man's response to the word of God to him.

The light sought and given in prayer is above all light upon one's self, upon the deep motivation coloring a man's reading of the evidence of God's actual call to him, so that he will be truly free and open to the Spirit illuminating the evidence and so that he will be really able to discern the orientation of his thoughts and feelings as he prayerfully reflects upon the decision to be made. His discerning prayer must be the continuing dialectic of reflection upon the existential word of God indicated in the concrete evidence of the actual situation and of contemplation of the word of God revealed in Jesus Christ, in the Gospel, in the living tradition of the Church, and experienced in his own spiritual history.

#### B. The Gathering of Evidence

In order to arrive at the content of the decision reached at the end of the process of discernment, it is necessary to read the signs of the times and to amass all the necessary knowledge and information for prayerful reflection upon the existential word of God. In cases of communal discernment, then, this evidence must be sought from all relevant sources: experts who are Jesuits and those who are not, research into the causes and the nature of the problems faced, attention to all the concrete circumstances of persons, place, and time. The

experts do not free the Jesuits from the responsibility to discern in the light of the "scope of our vocation", but they do help to provide the needed content for discernment.

It is here, too, that the true dialogue to communal discernment is of capital importance. If this dialogue is to be successful and not actually to lead to polarization and disunion, all the interlocutors must have achieved spiritual liberty and openness to the Spirit through prayer, and all must follow with absolute fidelity Ignatius' presupposition (in *Spiritual Exercises*, [22.]). In the context of the Jesuit dialogue of communal discernment, this preamble would mean that all should presuppose that the proposal of another Jesuit is based upon true dedication to the "scope of our vocation," rather than to condemn it as improperly motivated, until if and when there is proof to the contrary. In the concrete this means that all must really listen to one another's proposals as each man himself intends them, and that all must make the sincere effort to understand one another's feelings and attitudes. A man's attitude would demand correction only if it turned out actually to be based upon improper motivation or upon inadequate knowledge or insufficient prayerful reflection.

Ignatius' insistence upon the absolute necessity to use every means to gather the evidence for prayerful reflection in order to discern the word of God is manifested, too, by his basic principle for the superior's discernment of decisions. Whenever the superior is required to exercise his role of discernment in circumstances demanding information or competence he does not have, or in situations necessitating the clarification or liberation of his own spirit through dialogue with others, he should seek to involve his companions in the process of communal discernment. Furthermore, an important part of the evidence is the action of the Holy Spirit within the spirit of the individual Jesuit. Communal discernment requires a mutual discernment of spirits which will enable all to find the Spirit of God.

### C. Confirmation

The final step in the discernment process is the effort



to confirm the judgment that has been made of how to act in response to the word of God. According to Ignatius this confirmation may be external or internal or a combination of both. For example, Ignatius made constant efforts to have the scope of the vocation of the Society of Jesus and its Constitutions confirmed through papal bulls and briefs; and he looked to the vicar of Christ on earth for final discernment of where Jesuits should go, any place in the world for the apostolic service of Christ. His reason was that, in principle, the pope should have the most complete evidence revealing the most urgent and necessary apostolic mission to undertake at any given time.<sup>8</sup> The confirmation of the subjective discernment of an individual Jesuit in matters affecting the community life and mission is found ultimately in his obedience, after dialogue and representation, to the final judgment of his superior. The hierarchical structure of the Society of Jesus gives to local superiors the means of confirmation of their decisions by the general, who is responsible for the unified mission and life of the whole body of the Society and who should have the greatest access to evidence mediating the word of God to the whole Society.

Ordinarily, however, in both individual and communal discernment confirmation is experienced interiorly as profound peace, contentment, satisfaction, recognition in tranquillity that the way has been found to respond to the word of God here and now. This interior confirmation is operative throughout the whole process of discernment, "testing the Spirit" at every step until the moment of judgment for action and the experience of final confirmation.<sup>9</sup> Strictly speaking, however, Ignatius' own use of the word confirmation refers to the final, interior confirmation of the decision made at the end of the process of discernment.

Ignatius' constant use of the words contentment, satisfaction, peace, tranquillity, quiet, and rest to describe the experience of confirmation refer to the psychological dynamism that bears interior testimony that one has judged rightly. These terms refer neither to sensible consolation nor to the "rational" satisfaction and



rest enjoyed in the Third Time of Election, but to a much deeper spiritual experience. This experience issues from the sentir, the "felt-knowledge" grounded in the radical, existential attitude of spiritual liberty and of the integrating desire authentically to serve Christ apostolically in companionship here and now. The dynamic thrust of human feelings reacting to the evidence appearing in the concrete situation and to interior experiences during prayerful reflection upon this evidence finally comes to rest in the judgment which determines the decision how to respond to the word of God here and now. The result is a deep satisfaction of desire experienced interiorly as peace, tranquillity, contentment -- the quieting of the fluctuation of feelings in the peaceful conviction that the call of God has been heard. This peace leads to a profound joy "at the bottom of the heart" which can co-exist with feelings of real repugnance "at the top of the head". It is the experience of the fruits of the Spirit described by St. Paul: "But the Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control" (Gal. 5: 22-23).

Indeed, confirmation that one has truly discerned and responded to the word of God often enough is a truly Paschal experience. This word often demands that a man conform more closely to Christ crucified and that his "yes" to God be the "yes" uttered by Jesus in Gethsemane, wrung from repugnance and fear and tears and blood, and leading to Calvary. Then, the confirmation is experienced -- not at the top of the head, but at the bottom of the heart -- in profound peace and in a power to act and to suffer with a joy that bears testimony that through this death the Spirit has brought about new life, the New Creation achieved in the Risen Christ. The "Amen" to the call of God is transformed by the Father in Christ through the Spirit into an "Alleluia".

What is involved, then, in both ongoing confirmation during the process of discernment and in final confirmation of judgment is a continuing dialectic of "discernment of spirits" and of prayerful reflection on the evidence, a dialectic of the existential word of God

and the prophetic word of God. Sentir, "felt-knowledge", must have some content to react to. In communal discernment confirmation is operative throughout the process of discernment as a whole group of companions test the Spirit through confronting their reflection upon the evidence in mutual dialogue with the norm of the "scope of our vocation," and as they continue to verify in their prayer that the orientation of their thoughts and feelings is truly grounded in spiritual liberty and openness to the Spirit leading to interior peace. At the end of the process of communal discernment, when a judgment is finally made of how to act, the final confirmation is the mutual contentment (todos contentos, Ignatius repeatedly says) of all the companions verifying that they feel that they have searched out and responded to the word of God to them here and now to the best of their ability.

Actually, this contentment is only penultimate confirmation, since in accord with the dynamic mental structure of Ignatius whose teacher was always living experience, decisions are always subject to reform through renewed discernment if experience shows this to be necessary. Ultimate confirmation is given by God's active love in history. For instance, it is possible that all the companions would arrive at mutual contentment and confirmation unanimously and that, nevertheless, the judgment would prove to have been inaccurate because some necessary evidence had not been seen or because a new situation has arisen. This is why the Ignatian process of discernment is always dynamic, always open to the ever-new word of God. The response here and now is the important thing, and interior confirmation can occur because the decision reached is a truly free response to what is discerned as the word of God here and now. In this sense it is true to say that on the deepest level one has found and is doing "the will of God": the actual living of love. When it appears later on through experience that some necessary evidence has been inadvertently overlooked or unavailable, the necessary modification of decision is made in peace, and in trust that from the very "mistake" the Father will work a transforming good, a Paschal creation of "new life."



#### IV. Ignatian Communal Discernment

It is a commonplace that Jesuits today are living during a time of dramatic and rapid cultural breakdown and confusion, where change has become the most common experience of man. Because of this Jesuits are confronted by the constant necessity communally to discern experimental modes of living and of apostolic mission in order to accomplish the renewal and adaptation needed for survival of a religious order in the Church today. A living religious community in a rapidly changing world is by nature a place of experimentation. Fixation means extinction. Now, experimentation means consciously taking a risk of making a mistake and then having to experiment anew, hopefully having gained some wisdom from the mistake. When a course of action is clear and certain no one engages in useless experiments. For this reason it is more important than ever that Jesuits authentically engage in truly Ignatian discernment grounded in interior freedom and openness to the Spirit, always judging the experiments to be undertaken in the light of the permanent norm of the "scope of our vocation" -- the ever-greater apostolic service of Christ in companionship.

It is essential -- especially for American Jesuits culturally conditioned to value a type of representative democracy based upon lobbying, pressure groups, and majority rule -- to distinguish clearly between true Ignatian communal discernment and what is popularly called "enlightened consensus". Properly understood, enlightened consensus could be taken as a modern translation of Ignatius' confirmation through mutual contentment. But too often this consensus refers to a position arrived at through giving rein to felt-needs or subjective desires or prejudices not offered to the purification of the Spirit in prayer, and won through group pressures which can be much more totalitarian than benevolent one-man rule. Ignatian contentment is the profound peace experienced in recognizing that one has heard and responded to the word of God -- a word which is often disconcerting and unexpected and a call to share in the Cross of Christ. This deep contentment can co-exist with very great repugnance on the level of spontaneous emotions.



The problem is to distinguish between "what I want" and what is actually God's call to the individual or to the community here and now. In his own language, Ignatius called this the need to achieve true spiritual liberty and the desire only to serve God, in order not to arrive at a determination through "inordinate affections".

In order better to understand the dynamics of true Ignatian communal discernment, it is helpful to analyze his own practice of it with his first companions in the Deliberation of the First Fathers wherein they determined to found the Society of Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

#### A. The Deliberation of the First Fathers

In undertaking their communal discernment of whether they should form a religious order, the first companions followed the method they had developed through experience and which had led to their unanimous decision to pronounce the vow at Montmartre in 1534. This method is essentially a transposition of the method of Election of the Spiritual Exercises to a mutual discernment of spirits by an entire group in order to arrive at a common decision.

Before the vow of Montmartre, during their years of study and of making the Spiritual Exercises, the companions had shared and discussed their hopes and dreams and, inevitably, they had experienced the necessity imposed upon each of them individually to submit his own judgment to the control of their collective discernment. The "grace of companionship" was received and grasped through living it. We have the testimony of Simão Rodrigues that the decision to make the vow at Montmartre was arrived at only after lengthy and lively discussion (longam post disputationem).<sup>11</sup> Their discussions must have been a mutual declaration of calls of the Spirit, each one quite simply and openly declaring what he found to be the motions of the Holy Spirit within his own spirit. Through sharing their own interior experiences, the companions were enabled to arrive at a common judgment of their response to the word of God to them in the concrete situation in which they found themselves in 1534.

The Deliberation resulting in the foundation of the Society

of Jesus in 1539 was the fruit of a similar mutual discernment. As presented in the Deliberation the method of communal discernment consists of four steps, which undergo further refinement when it proves particularly difficult to arrive at a common decision.

(1) The process of communal discernment requires a common base upon which all are agreed: to seek to discern the word of God according to the norm of the "scope of our vocation."

(2) Note is taken of the fact that the individual members of the group have differing opinions about the best means to achieve their common end.

(3) Each one gives himself up to assiduous prayer and meditation seeking divine enlightenment -- true interior liberty and openness to the Spirit.

(4) Using all human means to find natural enlightenment also -- the gathering of evidence -- the members come together to share the fruits of their personal discernment in the process of communal discernment.

The first question the companions put to themselves -- whether or not they should remain united in one body, rather than disperse -- was easily answered in the affirmative when they shared in all frankness and simplicity the motions of the Holy Spirit which each one felt within himself. The reason given for this decision was that thus united they could more effectively serve Christ apostolically, that is, better fulfill the "scope of our vocation." The control of the communal discernment, therefore, was the common end about which they were already of one mind and in function of which they were seeking to discern the best means to achieve it.

In view of preserving their union in one apostolic body, and taking note that they had already vowed perpetual poverty and chastity, the companions now asked whether they should add the vow of obedience to one of their own number. The companions experienced much more difficulty in arriving at a common decision in this matter, and this was the occasion of further refinement of their method of communal discernment.



(1) They gave themselves even more intensely to prayer for light and for the confirmation of joy and peace in the Spirit concerning the question of obedience (in inveniundo gaudium et pacem in Spiritu Sancto circa obedientiam).

(2) During this period of personal prayer and discernment of spirits during the day, they did not talk to one another, but each one sought personal light from the Holy Spirit. Communal discernment cannot be successful unless each of the interlocutors already has truly discerned the spirits in himself in interior freedom. Giving into the temptation to "palace intrigue" would destroy openness to the Spirit.

(3) Taking care to achieve as complete objectivity and interior freedom as possible by considering himself as if not a member of the Society, each one after prayer and discernment decided his own conclusion concerning the question of obedience as a means to the greater apostolic service of Christ and the preservation of the union of companions.

(4) During the period of communal discernment, each one with all simplicity and frankness on the first evening stated the reasons against vowing obedience which he had found through his own prayer and reflection. The next evening each one outlined the reasons he saw in favor of vowed obedience.

Certainly, one of the most significant and practical dynamics within the Ignatian process of communal discernment is this deliberate separation of the times of presenting negative and affirmative arguments concerning the matter to be decided. Ignatius must have learned from experience, as it is still easy to do, that if negative and affirmative arguments are presented in confrontation during the same period of communal discernment, the discussion will quickly become debate rather than dialogue. Rather than listening with real openness to what the others have discerned through their own prayer and reflection, a man almost inevitably will be forming counter-arguments. In the long run, this separation of pro and con discussion periods actually will save time, because it will eliminate unnecessary



rhetoric and debate. Furthermore, the separation of the negative and positive factors seen by all the interlocutors often enough will manifest clearly which position has the greater weight of evidence in its favor indicating the word of God here and now. In the Deliberation it becomes evident to the first companions through their communal discernment that they should vow obedience to one of their own as the most effective means to accomplish their common end -- the ever greater apostolic service of Christ in companionship.

#### B. Communal Discernment Today

If true communal discernment of experiments to enable the Society of Jesus to renew itself and to adapt to the signs of the times today is a condition for the survival of the Society in the modern Church, then it is vital that all Jesuits learn to engage in authentic Ignatian communal discernment.<sup>12</sup> The first, sine qua non condition for this is the consciousness in all Jesuits of their true, profound communion -- unio animarum -- the cum-unio, the deep coming together realized through the personal commitment of each individual Jesuit to the scope of the common vocation, the discovery of the personal identity of each member in the common identity of the whole body of the Society. Communion, coming together deeply, supposes a shared, common vision of the meaning of this coming together, the reason for being of this communion. In order to engage in true communal discernment today, Jesuits must be able to verify that beneath all their surface tensions, disagreements, and positive conflicts in their expression of their common vocation, they do share a profound common vision which gives them a profound common identity -- a profound communion -- in spite of appearances to the contrary.

The problem that Jesuits face in trying to verify this communion today is the fact that communion requires communication. Much of the apparent discord and disunion among many Jesuits today -- which is merely a participation in the discord and disunion experienced at all levels of the human community today -- is at bottom a failure in communication, a breakdown of language. The problem is a problem of

language, a problem posed by the radical and rapid cultural change mankind is now undergoing. Much of the "generation gap" difficulty among Jesuits as well as among other groups today is basically cultural shock, a clash between two different cultural patterns.<sup>13</sup> If they can overcome fixation in the historically and culturally conditioned (and, so, relative) expressions of the "scope of our vocation," then, it will be possible for Jesuits even today to experience their profound communion. A Jesuit who understands the true meaning of the "scope of our vocation" and who can read the signs of the times will be able to adapt to the demands of the word of God in a new and changing culture and to do so in contentment and in union with his fellow Jesuits. Communal discernment can take place only when the underlying communion is experienced as truly real, truly present.

Recognition of one's own personal identity in Christ in the scope of the common vocation of the Society of Jesus to the ever greater service of Christ in his Church in companionship by going anywhere in the world to help people in need of Christ is experienced by each individual Jesuit as response to a particular word of God to him, an awareness of a charism -- the Holy Spirit actuating his presence and power within him and calling him to give all of his life and energy to living out this vocation. Because this individual experience is not verbal, but lived, much of the mutual awareness of sharing this experience must be achieved through non-verbal communication. One of the most effective means to achieve this shared awareness of the common experience of the presence and the power of the Spirit actual in the vocation of all Jesuits, at a time of great breakdown of language, seems to be that of shared, spontaneous prayer. Listening to another Jesuit praying to God, even in a language that another man could never use himself, is a most effective way to come to recognize that he shares the same basic experience of vocation, the same personal identity, the same response of life commitment as does the other man. Perhaps our efforts at communal discernment today would be helped by beginning and ending them with spontaneous, shared prayer.



Above all, what is required is a universal renewal in all Jesuits of their profound, personal faith-experience of Jesus Christ and of their total response to the charismatic call of the Holy Spirit within them, and a renewal of their communion through mutually sharing this experience. It is through union with Jesus Christ that Jesuits will achieve communion with one another. Neither individual nor communal discernment can succeed unless true interior freedom and openness to the Spirit is constantly maintained through continual prayer and discernment of spirits. Failure in communal discernment most often is the result of the fact that the men engaging in the discernment do not pray. It is as simple -- and as difficult -- as that.

During this age of rather glorified personalism and of rather romantic seeking of self-fulfillment, it is necessary also to insist upon the implications of the phrase in companionship in the "scope of our vocation," which is the permanent norm of all Jesuit discernment. In discussing the superior's discernment of decisions, Ignatius insists upon the need constantly to try to synthesize the personal good of individuals with the universal good of the entire community through a continuing dialectic. The aim is to effect a synthesis of these personal and community elements as often as possible through true communal discernment. But when such a synthesis proves impossible after this discernment, it is the universal good of the community which must be given priority in making decisions, precisely because the personal identity of each individual member is found in the community identity. In any community, even that of two persons in marriage, there is a new reality larger than each individual "I": it is the reality of "we". The final word must always be given to this "we".

When engaging in individual or communal discernment, then, a Jesuit must always be profoundly aware of being a member of the whole body of the Society of Jesus, a group of companions united in deep communion through their total commitment to the "scope of our vocation," united through their personal love of God in Jesus Christ and expressing this shared divine love in their love for one another and in their



united apostolic action. Because this is a vocation to serve Christ apostolically in companionship, it will at times require the abnegation of one's own judgment in order to find deep contentment in the result of the communal discernment of all the companions expressed in the unifying decision of the superior.

Precisely here, in the need to sacrifice one's own judgment and feelings to recognition of the greater good (at least over the long run) of preserving the union of all the companions for the apostolic service of Christ in companionship, the meaning of Ignatian contentment as opposed to spontaneous feelings of repugnance is clear. It is possible, for example, to desire one course of action after individual discernment and yet to recognize that a personally far less desirable one is better for the entire community here and now. If one is constantly using as the norm of his discernment the "scope of our vocation," he will share in the mutual contentment of the companions in the final common decision. That is to say, in spite of spontaneous feelings of disappointment, he will recognize in deep peace that this is the authentic expression of his personal identity in Christ and the true response to the word of God to him as a Jesuit here and now.

#### V. The Discernment of Spirits

The "discernment of spirits" -- the sifting apart of interior experiences in order to ascertain their origin, whether from the Spirit of God or from the Evil One -- begins in Christianity with response of faith or of unbelief to Jesus himself. Jesus is presented in the Gospel as a sign of contradiction, and each man confronting Jesus must ask from where He comes: is He discerned to be the Christ of God or one who works his signs by the power of Satan. The choice arrived at through this discernment is an existential choice which will determine the most profound orientation of a man and which, consequently, will provide the norm for discernment of all his following acts. Only after this discernment of the origin of Jesus can one speak of discerning individual choices, because such discernment supposes taking a basic position with regard to the total meaning of one's life which

determines the value of all future choices. Thereafter, temptations are motions which are against this fundamental orientation and living out its consequences.<sup>14</sup>

The entire dynamic of the Spiritual Exercise of Ignatius is a development of this basic discernment of Jesus as the Christ of God and of living out the consequences of commitment to following Him. This dynamic is presented in its essence in the Principle and Foundation at the beginning of the Exercises which defines the fundamental attitude of the Christian believer as that of true spiritual liberty, absolute openness to the Spirit, and the unique desire to achieve perfect communion with God. It is this attitude which must rule all one's choices and actions -- Ignatian "indifference". Through the exercises on Sin and Hell, one is led to the deep, interior experience of being closed in upon one's self, imprisoned in unlove now and forever, while the exercise on death brings him to confront the significance of his ultimate "yes" or "no" to God. The exercise on the Kingdom of Christ opens the exercitant to the specific call of Christ to him to conform the pattern of his life to the pattern of Christ's own life, whose meat was to do the will of the Father who had sent Him. In the oblation of this exercise (Spiritual Exercises, [98]) one utters an unconditional "yes" to the call of Christ and he accepts all the risks, all the unexpected and disconcerting consequences of this "yes".

During the following exercises of the Second Week, Ignatius pursues and clarifies the dynamic of the entire Spiritual Exercises. The Two Standards vividly portray the radical opposition between selfish self-love and Christian love which is perfectly self-giving love of God and of others. The exercise on Three Types of Men is designed to lead the exercitant to achieve complete openness to the Spirit, the operative power to say and to live his unconditional "yes" to the word of God in any situation whatsoever. Ignatius, who understood human psychology and the demands of authentic discernment very clearly, suggests a most effective spiritual exercise in his Note on the meditation on the Three Types of Men ([157]). It is a spiritual test to see whether



one is really free, really open to the Spirit in facing a specific choice to be discerned. The proof of this interior freedom and openness to the Spirit would be that in confronting the strictly imaginary projection that if the word of God would call one to a choice against one's own wishes, he could be content with this, with the contentment of profound peace in responding to the word of God. Ignatius advises the exercitant that if he finds that his heart is not yet truly free, that in order to achieve interior liberty, he should ask God in prayer to lead him where he would not like to go, provided this is where Christ wishes him to follow Him.

The consideration on the Third Degree of Humility is designed to place the commitment of the exercitant totally within a context of love and, so, of profound peace and joy. It follows upon many exercises of contemplation of the mysteries of the life of Christ, all designed to bring the exercitant to know Christ more intimately and to love him more ardently so that he will conform himself completely to Christ in always following the will of the Father, even when it leads to Calvary. Through these contemplations, the exercitant is gradually brought to experience the interior resonance with the feelings of Jesus Christ (sentir), which will enable him to discern the word of God to him in the Election and ever after. Through the consideration of the Third Degree of Humility, he brings to great clarity in his self-awareness that all of his following of Jesus is done in love and for love, that it is in conforming to the pattern of life of Jesus that he enters into continual communion with Him.

The Third Week of the Exercises deepens this communion of conforming love by deepening the exercitant's consciousness that he follows a suffering and crucified Lord through His labor and pain to His risen glory. It is above all a time of experienced growth in real love of Jesus. For love is unitive. It seeks communion. Love makes one want to be with the beloved wherever he goes. The love of Christ makes a man want to be with Him wherever He goes, even as He climbs Calvary. Ignatius places the exercitant before the crucified Christ and tells



him to look long at Jesus hanging there out of love of him and of all mankind, Jesus asking him, "Do you really want to be with Me"? Ignatius places the exercitant there and tells him to look long at Jesus hanging on the cross, until he experiences within himself the depth of his personal love for Jesus, so that he responds, "Lord, I look not at the cross, the wounds, the agony, the dying. I look only at You. Lord, I just want to be with You".

The Fourth Week of the Spiritual Exercises completes the Paschal experience of the exercitant and lays the foundation in his interior consciousness for the experience of true confirmation of his discerned choices, for completing his "Amen" with "Alleluia".

Thus, the entire dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises is a development of the basic discernment of Jesus as the Christ of God and of living out all the consequences of commitment to following Him. This basic model of all Christian discernment of spirits is verified in the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits appended to the Spiritual Exercises. Rather than commenting on each rule (which has been done ad infinitum by other commentators), the writer will attempt to describe the underlying dynamic of Ignatian discernment of spirits. Within the total Ignatian process of discernment, the discernment of spirits properly so called belongs within the step of personal prayer. It is the key to arriving at the sentir, the "felt-knowledge" reacting to the evidence which will enable one through this dialectic to discern the word of God here and now.

Ignatius considered the "motions" experienced in the interior awareness of a person to be of the utmost importance, and, indeed, he warned the director of the Spiritual Exercises to seek the reasons if the exercitant experienced none. Without undertaking here the vast study of the anthropology of Ignatius which is necessary, it is possible to see in his presentation of the three sources of these motions (one's own conscious freedom, the good spirit, and the bad spirit) his manner of expressing the difference between active and passive interior experience. The motions which require discernment are

those which are passive, wherein one is conscious of being moved toward a choice of action. Now, in the Ignatian anthropology, there is a basic distinction between the profound "I" which commits itself to free choices, and those "external" (unfree) forces, even within a man's own body-person, which act upon this "I". Discernment of the orientation of the "motions" he interiorly experiences would lead one to interior knowledge of his radical existential attitude which governs his way of choosing and acting. Thus, for those whose fundamental orientation is towards mortal sin, the enemy proposes imaginary sensual pleasure, while the "good spirit" causes remorse of conscience, and for those already committed to Christ, the "spirits" act in the contrary manner.

Even the rules given for the discernment of spirits during the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises suppose a person who is fundamentally oriented towards God. Through the alteration of experiences of consolation and desolation, he can determine his progress in growth in the Spirit and can deepen his commitment to God and his growth in interior freedom. Discernment in these rules, nevertheless, is aimed at helping one to distinguish between motions to actions which at least on the theoretical level are clearly distinguishable as good or evil. Consolation and desolation are defined by Ignatius in terms of feelings, interior experiences. Consolation is the felt experience of the love of God, of interior freedom and openness to the Spirit. Desolation, on the contrary, is a feeling of attraction to "low things", "without love", the Directory says.<sup>15</sup> It is the felt experience of imprisonment in self-love, "unlove". When one is in desolation he cannot trust his feelings, his sentir, to guide his discernment and, therefore, he must not change decisions made when he was consoled -- free and open to the Spirit. Through the exercise of memory, he must recall this previous experience of consolation, bringing the peace of the past to the present.

Memory for Ignatius is not static, but dynamic -- not the recalling of a past moment in "linear" time, but an act of calling up what one carries now within one's own complex self-awareness. Perhaps the most useful model for grasping this dynamic conception of human



consciousness is to imagine it as an ever expanding sphere within which there are concentric spheres at varying degrees of distance from the center of attention where one is immediately focussing his awareness. The structure of human consciousness is a structure of continual death and resurrection. The only "I" that I am is the self of the present moment summing up all my past history, which I carry with me in my ever expanding consciousness, straining towards my future self-actualization. But each present moment of self-consciousness slips into my past even as I try to focus upon it -- it dies and immediately rises again into a new moment of expanded self-awareness.

Now, the point is that depending upon the relative distance from my center of immediate attention of all my past lived experiences -- including those of consolation, of openness to God and of consciousness of the presence and power of the Spirit within me -- I am more or less clearly or vaguely aware or unaware of these experiences which I carry with me at the present moment. Freud, using a different model, was describing this situation with his notions of the subconscious and the unconscious. Thus, while concentrating upon writing this paper all sorts of things are going on within my awareness: some fairly clear, some rather vague, some causes of joy, some of anxiety. Anyone can verify this situation in his own experience. As we shall see, it is this complex dynamism of present self-awareness which underlies Ignatius' notion of finding God in all things. Here, it is enough to note that the memory of consolation when in desolation is the focussing of attention upon the more or less remote sphere of one's ever expanding consciousness where he carries now his past experience of consolation, of God. It is through going over one's past history still present within him that clarifies his growth in the spirit and the pedagogy of God in his life and that one preserves continuity across the most divergent phases of his spiritual life.

It is the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits given for the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises which are helpful for the process of discernment of the word of God in ambiguous concrete situations,



those wherein there is no clear distinction between right and wrong nor between good and better, but wherein, precisely, the problem is to judge the authentic call of the Spirit to which one must respond. The use of these rules supposes a person who is not neurotic or emotionally unbalanced, but is really mature, one who has truly discovered his own personal identity in Christ and who has freely totally committed himself to living it. This is why Ignatius is so insistent that the Spiritual Exercises are not for everyone and that the director must carefully discern whether a person should pass from the First Week into the Second Week. It has been well said that the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits of the Second Week are not only useless, they are positively dangerous for a person who has an inordinate affection.

Since the Evil One can "transform himself into an angel of light," the problem of discernment becomes one of detecting the origin of "motions" by discerning their orientation -- the "serpent's tail" that lurks behind. To accomplish this discernment successfully in ambiguous situations requires the comparison of experience with experience, that is to say, it supposes that one carries within one's own consciousness the permanent touchstone of profound interior peace. The validity of a present choice among possible alternatives is confirmed by comparing one's interior experience of peace, tranquillity, and contentment in this specific choice (or the lack of this peace) with the peace and tranquillity enjoyed in his primordial experience of openness and surrender to God in Christ. Unless one has already had the experience of discovering his own personal identity in Christ confirmed by a profound awareness of rest, fulfillment, tranquillity, "coming home" in his free commitment to this identity, he is incapable of comparing to it his experience in the choice of a specific action, and it is impossible for him to discover the word of God to him here and now by the discernment of spirits.<sup>16</sup>

To use the method of discernment of spirits, therefore, requires the continual renewal in prayer of one's primordial experience of God in Christ. For the Jesuit, this means the renewal of his

awareness of the particular call of the Holy Spirit which led him to find his personal identity in the communal scope of our vocation and in his total commitment to this vocation. This provides him with the permanent touchstone to discern the orientation and the origin of the "motions" he experiences within his interior awareness when he faces alternative choices of action in living out his vocation. The confirmation of mutual contentment of communal discernment supposes the presence of this touchstone of confirmation within all the individual Jesuits involved. What is envisioned here is what the commentators call "positive confirmation" of a choice, that is to say, interior peace felt as coming from God and manifesting his acceptance of the choice. If there is no experience of this interior peace, then the choice must be made according to the Third Time of Election. In this case the confirmation is "negative" or "interpretative", that is to say, it is the continuation through dynamic memory of an interior peace which is not a new experience in immediate awareness, but the absence of any negative experience. The man in no way feels that God rejects his choice and he interprets this silence of the Lord as confirmation of it.

It is the primordial experience of the discovery of personal identity in Christ, which is the existential choice that determines the most profound orientation of the whole being of a man and which, consequently, provides the norm of discernment for all of his consequent choices. In this primordial experience there is an awareness of profound peace in total openness to whatever consequences will follow upon commitment to creating this identity, of complete surrender to whatever unforeseeable calls of the Spirit will be heard in the future, of absolute readiness to follow Christ wherever he goes. It is as if a man said, "I have no idea where you will lead me, but I am ready for anything, and in this is my peace, my fulfillment, and my completion." The more faithful he is in carrying out the consequences of this commitment every day and in every choice, the more a man will grow in the ability to discern the authentic choices he should make through "felt-knowledge".

Man is a relational being. He grows in his personality,



creates his personal identity, by progressively integrating all the relationships of his life around the core of selfhood formed by his basic life commitment. This relational integration determines whether a "motion" is discerned as coming from the "good spirit" or the "bad spirit". A choice which in itself might be good for one person, because it would be integratable into his personal identity might be bad for another person, because it is unintegratable. What might be a positive step towards completion in one person, could be distortion of the relational integration of another person. What must be discerned individually or communally by Jesuits is whether a given choice is integratable into the "scope of our vocation"; and, among various alternative choices, which one seems most clearly to be the word of God here and now: which choice is most in conformity with the pattern of Christ's obedience to the Father's will.

Now, growth in the Spirit is growth in the relational integration of personality, the ever greater structuring of personal identity within all the concentric spheres of ever expanding self-awareness. Gradually, the awareness of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and of total responsiveness to his calls becomes more and more constant and clear, although it is not the focus of immediate attention. This is what Ignatius means by "finding God in all things". God becomes a climate within which one always lives, a pervading atmosphere within which one always acts, the constant horizon against which one always sees everything; and one can turn his focus of attention to God at will, as Ignatius said he could do toward the end of his life: to find God whenever he wished to. Through growth in the Spirit (not overnight, but through ongoing fidelity and prayer and authentic discernment), one is gradually led to full consciousness of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit within him. It is this consciousness which is described in the ancient Christian tradition of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The well-known insistence of Ignatius upon the practice of daily examens of conscience is completely intelligible within this context of growth in the Spirit. It is the constant renewal of one's



primordial experience of total openness to God, the continual comparison of experiences in order to discern always the word of God here and now and authentically to respond to it. As one grows in the Spirit, as all the relationships of his life become more and more integrated into his Jesuit identity, he more and more will experience with great facility -- almost spontaneously -- the ongoing discernment of his ordinary daily actions through sentir, as he feels the consonance or the dissonance of "motions" with his Jesuit identity. Most of his choices, therefore, will be taken not through understanding, but through the testimony of living experience, not as the conclusion of a process of reasoning, but as the response to an interior attraction which causes him to prefer one course of action to another, because he recognizes in it the word of God actually spoken to him. When he confronts a more difficult and ambiguous choice, he will be able to use the discernment of spirits familiarly in his prayerful reflection upon the complexity of the evidence, and he will be able to arrive at a choice even of an experiment with interior peace and contentment. Like Ignatius before him, he will learn to find God in all things, even in the disconcerting word and the unexpected call, even in the Cross of Christ.

## VI. Conclusion

St. Ignatius of Loyola left to the members of the Society of Jesus a rich spiritual heritage within which his teaching on discernment is perhaps the richest element. As Jesuits today face the challenges of an age of confusion and change, when the active love of God in history is, nevertheless, most marvellously active, they can do so with great courage and with the strength of companions united in profound communion by communally discerning the word of God to them for the ever greater apostolic service of Christ in companionship.

In concluding this study, the writer would like to share with the readers a remarkably vivid presentation of the man Ignatius of Loyola, a testimony to his own continual and faithful discernment of the word of God to him. It is a translation of a homily preached on the feast of St. Ignatius in 1966, by Fr. Michel de Certeau, S.J.,

in the Church of St. Ignatius, Paris, France.<sup>17</sup>

"We celebrate St. Ignatius of Loyola today. Was he a politician or a crusader, a sixteenth-century Lenin or a conquistador, a discoverer of America? His end answers these questions. He died in harness on July 31, 1556, nearly alone and with no one aware of it, caught up until the end in obscure, daily tasks and in the administration of his nascent order. There was nothing spectacular or edifying in his passing. He fell into the furrow which he was plowing and where he was putting one foot down after the other; he died in the little office where he organized his work day after day. This is the silent death of a worker occupied until the last moment with the "harvest" of which the Gospel speaks. He bound himself by love to this service; he rooted himself in it resolutely, lucidly, for years and years, before being abruptly buried like a seed in the earth.

"He died there, without seeing the end of the day which had begun, without any certainty about the future destiny of the order which he had founded, without a guarantee of the future fidelity of his friends and of the work which he had served. He was simply at his post when he was definitively grasped and surprised by God; he was still doing the daily deed, realistic, always to be done again, always poor, which responded moment by moment to the task, the deed of advancing step by step in the harvest field of which he knew neither the beginning nor the final yield. His ending was that of a laborer and a poor man dead at his work. This is the most common death; it is also the most beautiful. He did not choose it, but I would dare to say that he merited it as the last word of a life risked all the way in the courage to be faithful to ceaseless renewal of service. It is the signature of his sanctity, as at the end of a final report or of a last letter.

"He had been quite different during his youth. He was an ambitious man of the world and he loved flashy actions, being attracted to deeds which would draw the attention of others. He loved to be loved, and there was a touch of Don Quixote in him which remained even until after his conversion, when, with a leg deformed by a wound,



he dreamed of being a hero of God, to do deeds like those of the great saints whose golden legends he had enthusiastically read: 'What Francis of Assisi did, what Dominic did, I shall do also'.

"He was still a dreamer; he preferred the past to the present; he gave way to the prestige of the exceptional, and he did not yet discern Jesus of Nazareth in the modesty of present and real tasks and needs. But Ignatius would soon perceive it: the 'perfection' to which God calls us is not in those images of the extraordinary, in those anxious obsessions, in those flights to somewhere else which stops us where we are. Sanctity is not one of those dreams which condemn us and fascinate us (which often comes to the same thing), because we are afraid to be ourselves, to be only men, to be men at last, today, modestly.

"A decisive deed of Ignatius recalls to us where we must place in our lives courage and humility. After many adventures (which his Autobiography narrates for us), after extraordinary years, after having been a pilgrim and a vagabond around the whole Mediterranean, after having received the highest mystical graces and already having united devoted disciples around himself, already old and rich in experience, Ignatius decided to go to school -- and to go one thousand miles away from his home to the University of Paris. He began his life again. This is what he had to do. He did not content himself by prophesying new times; he entered into them effectively, modestly, and audaciously, by means of learned activity. If he discerned the importance of it, it was not only to point it out to others, as if he were afraid to touch it himself. He experienced the tool of his epoch, he ran the real risk which the newness of the present imposes, but the future of which is unknown. He broke with his past in order to find God there where his contemporaries were working. He shared in the audacity of his time, he participated in a new task, knowing that the work and the creations of men are their meeting-place with God.

"His conversion was, thus, a re-conversion; his fidelity to God could be expressed only through a courageous re-beginning, by the work of man. Docility and audacity go together.



"An analogous reconversion is ceaselessly demanded of us. God does not seek our dreams, our anxieties, or our 'brilliant ideas'. He calls us through the reality of a work and of a companionship. He speaks to us through a labor which must become the language and the discovery of love. Concretely, this means that we must find ourselves incessantly going back to school. To what school? That of other people, that of children, that of new techniques, that of progress, of events, and of the unexpected . . . It is necessary that we let go of our dreams and that we lose the security which we cling to in our past, in order to go forward, forgetting what is behind, as St. Paul said. This will be, modestly, our way to pay the price of sharing in the present task, to learn, thanks to others, the seriousness of cooperation in the work of the 'harvest'.

"And since we are a family in this church dedicated to St. Ignatius and served by Jesuits, I ask you to pray that today the Company of Jesus will be faithful to this reconversion. We must lose our attachment to our successes which are past, renounce the defense of a privilege of yesterday, in order to be modestly, audaciously, at the service of the present. We must each one have this courage of the worker, this realistic audacity, this burying and this poverty in the newness of things. Each one of us must go to school in order to become the pupil and the laborer of God."

AMEN ----- ALLELUIA!

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 An invaluable study of the history of discernment is Fr. Dingjan, O.S.B., Discretio: les origines patristiques et monastiques de la doctrine sur la prudence chez saint Thomas d'Aquin (Assen: Van Gorcum and Co., N.V., 1967).
- 2 For clarity in reading this study, here is a schematic explanation of this terminology:
  - a) The existential word of God is the actual event mediating God's active love in history: the concrete situation here and now englobing the person himself doing the discerning (who exists at this moment at a particular level of personal human and spiritual maturity), the other persons involved, and all the various actual circumstances.
  - b) The prophetic word of God is the revealed word of God in Jesus Christ, in the Bible, in the living tradition of the Church, and in the personal spiritual history of the discerner's own growth in the Spirit -- his own charism and the consequent calls of the Spirit to which he has responded.
  - c) The word of God here and now is the actual present call of God to a man or a community, which must be discerned through the dialectic of the existential word and the prophetic word of God in order to respond to it. It is the "will of God" which must be sought and found and obeyed. It is through interpreting, assessing, and prayerfully reflecting upon the existential word of God in the light of the prophetic word of God to him here and now. The writer is indebted to Fr. Carl Pfeifer, S.J., for the basis of this schema.

Another reason for preferring the expression "the word of God here and now" to the "will of God", is that through the history of theology since the time of Ignatius, especially in the predestination controversies, the "will of God" has often been conceived statically and applied in careless ways to specific events, requiring a veritable salad of antecedent and consequent wills and decrees in the living Holy Trinity. For a particularly enlightening treatment of the problem of Divine Providence, see John H. Wright, S.J., "The Eternal Plan of Divine Providence", Theological Studies, XXVII (1966), 27-57.
- 3 There is little in English on discernment. Of particular value, however, are Rahner, Karl, S.J., The Dynamic Element in the Church (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), and a commentary on Rahner's discussion by Avery Dulles, S.J., "Finding God's Will", Woodstock



Letters, XCIV (1965), 139-152. Worth noting, also, is W.W. Meissner, S.J., "Psychological Notes on the Spiritual Exercises," Woodstock Letters, XCII (1963), 349-366; XCIII, 31-58, 165-199. The most complete treatment and bibliographies are in the articles on "Discernment" in the Dictionnaire de la Spiritualité. The present study is based upon research and documentation contained in the writer's unpublished dissertation, Making an Apostolic Community of Love: The Role of the Superior According to Saint Ignatius Loyola. A condensed version of this dissertation is in process of publication by the Institute of Jesuit Sources. There are some very fine articles on discernment in the French review Christus, especially in #4 (1954). Innumerable other articles have been written in French and Spanish, but many of them are of little value. A work of considerable value and notable difficulty is Fessard, G., S.J., La dialectique des Exercices Spirituels de Saint Ignace de Loyola (Paris: Aubier, Vol. I, 1956; Vol. II, 1966).

- 4 Karl Rahner (op. cit.) insists upon discernment of the origin of interior motions as the central element in Ignatian discernment of spirits, while the French writers in general insist upon discernment of the orientation of the progression of thoughts stimulated by these motions. The controversy is purely theoretical. In the concrete, both the orientation and the origin are discerned together, as is clearly shown in Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits for the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises.
- 5 There is an interesting similarity between Ignatian sentir and the descriptions of "experiential experience" or of "knowledge by connaturality" used by some modern theologians in discussing the act of faith.
- 6 In the early documents of the Society of Jesus, the expression scopus vocationis nostrae refers to the specific end, the particular charism of this Society: that which must be renewed authentically according to the Second Vatican Council. The expression of this "scope" given in the text is the result of a thorough study of the vocabulary and the spiritual evolution of Ignatius. It is documented in the writer's dissertation. The specific charism of a founder and of a religious order is an historical, documentable reality. The value and validity of this particular charism for the service of the Church could come to an end historically, in which case the religious order would come to an end. The assumption of the writer is that this is not the case for the charism of Ignatius in the Society of Jesus today. Were this the case, then, we should honestly admit the fact and begin something new, which we should distinguish sharply from the Society of Jesus of Ignatius.
- 7 Spiritual Exercises, [336]. Cf. the remarkable letter of June 18, 1536, Ignatius to Theresa Rejadella, Sti. Ignatii ... Epistolae..., (Madrid: MHSJ, 1903-1911), I, 105; Letters of St. Ignatius,



trans. W.J. Young, S.J. (Chicago, 1959), p. 22

- 8 A striking example of "external" confirmation was Ignatius' obedience to the Franciscan Guardian of Jerusalem, when with papal authority the Friar ordered him to leave Jerusalem, after Ignatius had absolutely determined to remain there to serve Christ apostolically among the infidels for the rest of his life. Later on, when recounting his effort to find the will of God for his future activity (pensando quid agendum), Ignatius remarked that he was doing so because he had understood that it was the will of God that he should not remain in Jerusalem (Fontes Narrativi de S. Ignatio ... (Rome, 1943), I, 430.
- 9 An example of the notion of ongoing confirmation during the discernment process is the continual dialogue of the exercitant and the director during the Spiritual Exercises leading up to the Election.
- 10 The text of the Deliberatio Primorum Patrum is in the third series of the Monumenta Ignatiana, T.I, Monumenta Constitutionum Praevia, pp. 1-7 (Rome, 1934). An English translation of the Deliberation by D. Maruca, S.J., is available in the Woodstock Letters, XCV (1966), 325-333. Another translation will appear in the present writer's forthcoming book (see note 3 above).
- 11 Pontes Narrativi, III, 20.
- 12 It is perhaps well to note that communal discernment is not a "T-group" or a sensitivity session, but a mutual discernment of spirits leading to a decision for action as Jesuits. For an excellent treatment of the use of communal discernment in attempting to solve a concrete problem in the choice of ministries, see the article by M.J. Sheeran, S.J., in the January, 1970, issue of the Woodstock Letters, "Discernment as a Political Problem: the Ignatian Art of Government," Woodstock Letters, XCVIII (1969), 446-464.
- 13 See John R. Sheets, S.J., "A Profile of the Contemporary Jesuit: His Challenges and Opportunities", Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits, Vol. I, No. 1 (St. Louis, September, 1969), especially pp. 7-10.
- 14 See the splendid presentation of discernment in the Scripture in Dingjan, op. cit., pp. 229-235.
- 15 Directoria Exercitiorum Spiritualium (1540-1599), (Rome: MHSJ, 1955), II, 72.
- 16 For a more detailed and theoretical discussion of this comparison, see the works of Rahner, Dulles, and Sheerin cited above in fnn. 3 and 12.
- 17 The translation is by the present writer. The italics are those of Fr. de Certeau.



